DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 793 EA 017 300

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TITLE Closing Schools without Enraging the Public.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National School Boards Association (San Francisco, CA, April 23-26, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Consultants; Declining Enrollment; Educational Facilities Planning; Elementary Secondary Education; Interpersonal Communication; *Long Range Planning; Middle Schools; *School Closing; *School Community Relationship; School Organization
IDENTIFIERS *Raytown Consolidated School District 2 MO

ABSTRACT

In the late 1970's, declining enrollment in Raytown, Missouri, prompted the school board to employ an outside consulting firm to prepare a 10-year comprehensive demographic forecast. The enrollment forecast clearly indicated that the decline would continue. A facility utilization study found that the overall physical condition of the schools was good but several problem areas would require attention. Four alternative attendance plans were presented, along with the demographic study, to school personnel and the community. A 17-member citizens' committee appointed to review the studies recommended closing three schools and changing from junior high schools to middle schools. Meetings were held to prepare the district patrons and students for reorganization. The experiences in this school district indicate that the keys to closing schools without fighting are: (1) provide credible facts on enrollment, (2) prepare a good facility study, (3) plan for the future needs, (4) communicate these plans to the staff and to the patrons, (5) appoint a citizens' committee to review the plans, and (6) take a reasonable time to complete the reorganization. (MLF)

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NSBA CONVENTION
San Francisco, Calif.
April 23-26, 1983

Panelist: Donald B. Orrell, President
Raytown Board of Education
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# CLOSING SCHOOLS WITHOUT ENRAGING THE PUBLIC

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# CLOSING SCHOOLS WITHOUT ENRAGING THE PUBLIC

Raytown, Missouri is a suburban community surrounded on three sides by Kansas City, Missouri and on the fourth side by President Harry S. Truman's home town of Independence. Our school district covers an area of 32 square miles. Ten square miles in Raytown, twenty square miles in Kansas City and two square miles in Independence. In population, there are 33,000 people in Raytown and about 75,000 people in the school district.

Late in the seventies, Raytown Consolidated School District No. 2 faced a challenge relative to the wisest use of its public school facilities. For several years the Board of Education had been aware of the need to plan for a rapidly decreasing enrollment. The so called 'baby boom' was almost over. The total enrollment had declined from a high of over 16,000 in 1969 to an enrollment of just over 10,000 in 1978. Local projections indicated further reductions to about 8,000 students by the end of the 80's.

The past decade had seen the school district relieve the crowded conditions in many schools, reduce class sizes, meet new program requirements in existing space without the need for major expansion and also provide additional educational opportunities such as vocational and safety education. Now declining enrollment presented new problems in program offerings, surplus space, higher costs, and general inefficiency of operation.

Recognizing the need for long range planning, in July, 1978, the Board of Education authorized the Midwest Research Institute of Kansas City to prepare a ten year comprehensive demographic forecast, by grade, for our district. Why a consulting firm? Why not our own district staff? The immediate five year enrollment projections could be found by using the public records of live births. An estimate could have been made of the in and out migrations. Then from these figures, the remaining five years could have been projected.

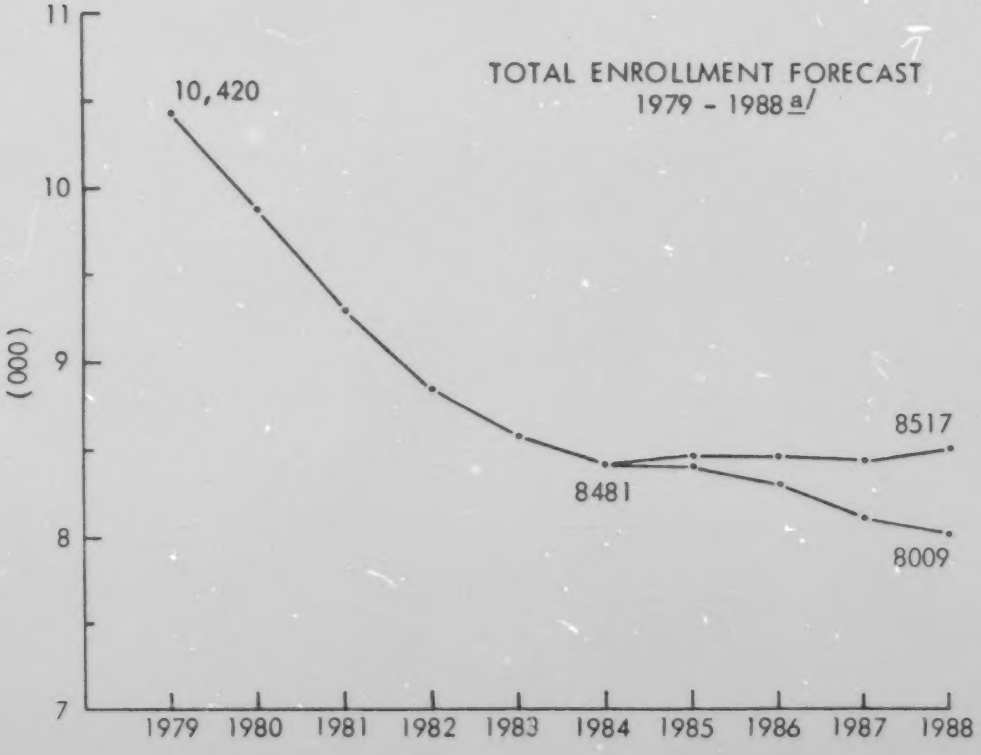
For two very important reasons we chose the consulting firm.

1. To establish credibility of the projected enrollment figures, and

2. To divert any possible public anger from the board and district administrators should it be necessary to close some schools.

In March, 1979, Dr. Bruce B. Morgan, of the Midwest Research Institute presented the results of the nine month study at a district wide public meeting. The study considered scioeconomic trends and historical enrollments, presented enrollment forecasts, and discussed the implications of the enrollment forecasts for district planning.

The enrollment forecasts were made, by grade, beginning in 1979 through 1988. The results clearly indicated that enrollments would decline further to about 8,500 students in 1984. Beginning with 1985 and based upon a high fertility assumption, enrollments would remain on a stable plateau at around 8,500 students through 1988. On a low fertility assumption the enrollments would continue to decline to around 8,000 students in 1988.




Source: Midwest Research Institute

a/ Enrollment or membership after 1st week of school.

We had the facts. We would have about two years to make plans for some possible changes in our district facilities. Because Midwest Research Institute had made similar studies for other districts, they presented some planning steps for our consideration in the summary of their demographic report.

Those plans were

1. Prepare a comprehensive facilities evaluation. Considering site, space, present usage, adequacy, and suitability for alternative uses.

2. Prepare estimates of district resources for the next ten years. Discuss the programs needed to maintain the current high quality educational system and then give consideration to personnel, district organization, and other resources needed to implement the program.

3. Assess alternatives to alleviate the impacts of declining enrollments and develop a plan to make adjustments. Examples of alternatives are:

    a. Develop a policy and procedure for school consolidation and closing.

    b. Increase utilization of existing facilities to avoid school closure.

4. Develop a community task force to review, comment, and help develop facilities and financial plans.

5. Assess the feasibility of a flexible organization structure plan for the district. We were using a K-6-3-3 attendance pattern. Consider what other plans might help the district.

The district administrators and board studied the enrollment forecasts and the planning implications for a few months. In July, 1979, the board approved a facility utilization study to be prepared by Midwest Research Institute. A special staff of architects and engineers would evaluate each building and make recommendations regarding their future use.

Initially, we wanted a consulting firm to make the study for the same reasons as mentioned earlier.

1. To provide credibility to the results of the study
2. To eliminate or reduce potential public anger from the board and administrators if it was necessary to close a school.

The cost of the facilities study was approximately $12,000. However, during the evaluation, a potentially damaging defect was discovered in a heating system in one of the buildings. The cost of the repairs, had the defect not been discovered, would have been far more than the cost of the facilities study. We have an excellent maintenance staff, but the defect was simply not detected in the normal maintenance function.

In November, 1979, the results of the four month facility study were presented to the district at a special board meeting.

The study indicated the overall physical condition of the C-2 Schools was good but several problem areas would require attention. Utilization of all buildings was below capacity resulting in abnormal class sizes, some dual classes or reduced program offerings.

Four alternative attendance plans were presented:

1. Continue the present organization with greater underutilization and lower efficiency.

2. Close three elementary schools and one junior high school using a K-5-3-4 or K-6-2-4 attendance plan. The closed junior high would be used for a business office, adult education center, and share the gymnasium space with a nearby high school.

3. Close three elementary schools using K-5-3-1-3 attendance plan. The ninth graders would all attend one junior high.

4. Close three elementary schools and one junior high using a K-5-3-2-2 attendance plan with lower 9 and 10th grade and upper 11 and 12th grade schools.

Because of the implications of the study the most important step was completed next. COMMUNICATIONS first with the staff and then with the community, and I want to underline and capitalize the word, COMMUNICATIONS. Provide an opportunity for questions and answers.

Within two days following the presentation of the MRI Study at the special board meeting, our district superintendent, Dr. Robert Atkin, met with the faculty of each school to discuss the MRI Study in detail and to destroy the potential rumor mill.

Within two months, the district administrators and board members presented and discussed the MRI Study at

1) Eleven elementary PTA meetings
2) Two Board-Patron coffees
3) A Chamber of Commerce meeting
4) A Rotary and Kiwanis Club meeting
5) Three public meetings held at each of the junior high schools on alternate nights to provide an opportunity for all interested patrons to attend. Kansas Citys' TV and news media people were present as well.

The MRI Study was presented at the public meetings by Dr. Atkin and a member of the MRI staff. Questions were answered primarily by the people that prepared the study and not by the district staff or board members.

In December 1979, the board appointed a 17 member Citizens Committee to review the study prepared by MRI on facility utilization and the alternatives. The committee members were teachers, a housewife, a junior high principal, a salesman, a CPA, a bank vice-president, a lawyer, a dentist, a business manager, a Savings & Loan vice-president, a utility company supervisor, and a high school principal. This was a very good cross section of the community. This committee met five times both with and without school board members and administrators present.

The committee recommended:

1. Using a K-5-3-4 plan with nine elementary schools housing grades K-5, two middle schools housing grades 6, 7, 8 and two high schools housing grades 9 thru 12.

2. Two elementary schools would be closed. One the oldest in the district and one relatively new.

3. One junior high would be closed and become part of the high school campus.

4. The change would be completed over a two year period. (See Reorganization Plan K-5-3-4).

    a. In the first year, the seventh grade would attend only two junior highs

    b. In the second year, all attendance boundaries were changed, ninth graders moved to the high school and the three buildings were closed.

5. The administration and Board should review the continued need for nine elementary buildings in 1984-85.

Yes, there was some trauma and some tears. Whenever mothers and fathers attended the same school that their children were attending, there is bound to be some emotions shown. One of the schools recommended for closing had started as a one room log cabin at the turn of the century.

The Board of Education approved the reorganization plan that was recommended by the Citizens Committee and the district administrators. We started the reorganization plan in the 1980-81 school year. A program was put together to tell the general public and staff how the plan would work. Teachers and administrators visited middle schools and attended seminars on middle school programs. The excitement of the new plan was starting to grow. Middle school teachers were working in groups preparing programs and exchanging ideas. We felt some measure of success with some of the staff committed to the program. We had one more hill to climb, so to speak. We were also removing extra curricular athletics from the middle schools and replacing it with an intramural program.

We held meeting after meeting to prepare the district patrons and students for reorganization. We had our share of critics in the press and the usual petitions not to close "OUR" school.

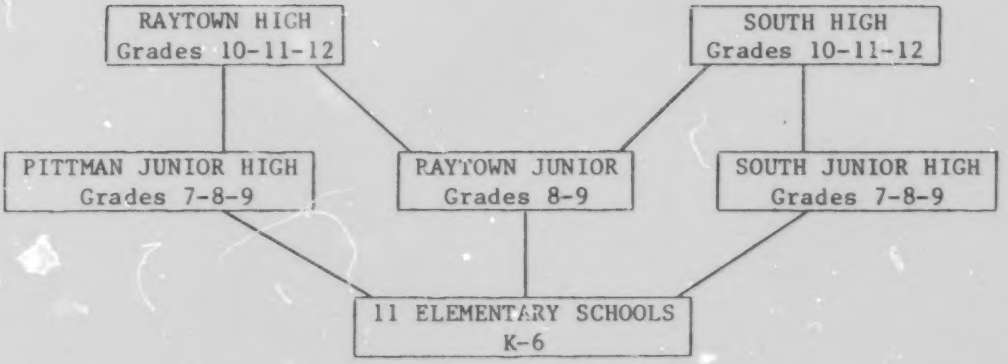
We followed our reorganization plan, closed the schools, replaced the junior highs with middle schools, moved the ninth graders to the high school, moved the sixth grade to the middle schools, and replaced extra curricular athletics with an intramural program.

# REORGANIZATION PLAN

## K - 5 - 3 - 4

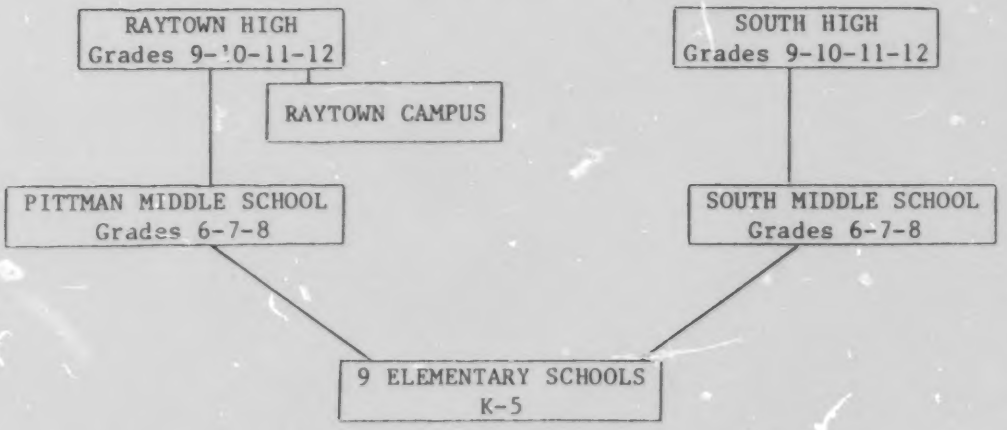
### SCHOOL YEAR

### 1980-81




### SCHOOL YEAR

### 1981-82



Since 1981 we have sold the older elementary school that has been remodeled into a professional building. The newer school was leased for a medical training center. The junior high was closed and then re-opened as a multi-use facility. The gymnasium and some classrooms were used by the neighboring high school. Part of the building was renovated for use as the district business office including the district's computers and related facilities. We used another part for the district's media center. In yet another part, we established the Adult Education Center and offered daytime adult education classes.

The Kansas City Star had this to say about the reorganization plan. "Graceful response to change sets Raytown Schools apart", reads the headline. "The lack of sound and fury surrounding school changes is not accident. It's part of the low-key approach that has characterized the seven years Dr. Robert Atkin has been Superintendent of Raytown Schools. That approach -- coupled with a well organized, comprehensive program of involving the community in school decisions -- marks Raytown as a model in its approach to solving the types of problems that have occasioned lawsuits, bitter protests, and fractured feelings in other Kansas City area school districts."

You can close schools without fighting a war. The keys are:

1. Provide credible facts on enrollment
2. Prepare a good facility study
3. Plan for the future needs
4. Communicate these plans with alternatives to the staff and to the patrons
5. Appoint a citizens committee to review the plans
6. Take a reasonable time to complete the reorganization

FOOTNOTE:

Dr. Robert Atkin has served as a consultant to other districts that are planning for school closings.

OUTLINE:

# CLOSING SCHOOLS WITHOUT ENRAGING THE PUBLIC

1. SETTING THE STAGE -
    a. Raytown -- What and Where
2. DECLINING ENROLLMENTS
    a. Enhancing the program
    b. Too much of a good thing
3. GETTING THE FACTS WITH A DEMOGRAPHIC STUDY
    a. Credibility
    b. Diverting the patrons' anger
4. REVIEW OF THE MIDWEST RESEARCH INSTITUTES' DEMOGRAPHIC STUDY AND PLANNING SUMMARY
    a. The five steps
5. FACILITIES UTILIZATION STUDY
    a. Building closings
    b. Attendance alternatives
6. PRESENTING THE PLAN TO THE PEOPLE
    a. Meetings with the staff
    b. Meetings with the patrons
7. REVIEW OF THE PLANS BY THE CITIZENS COMMITTEE
8. A REORGANIZATION PLAN IS APPROVED
9. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PLAN
10. AN OVERVIEW AND A FUTURE LOOK